

Victor Datskevich

THE GREEN

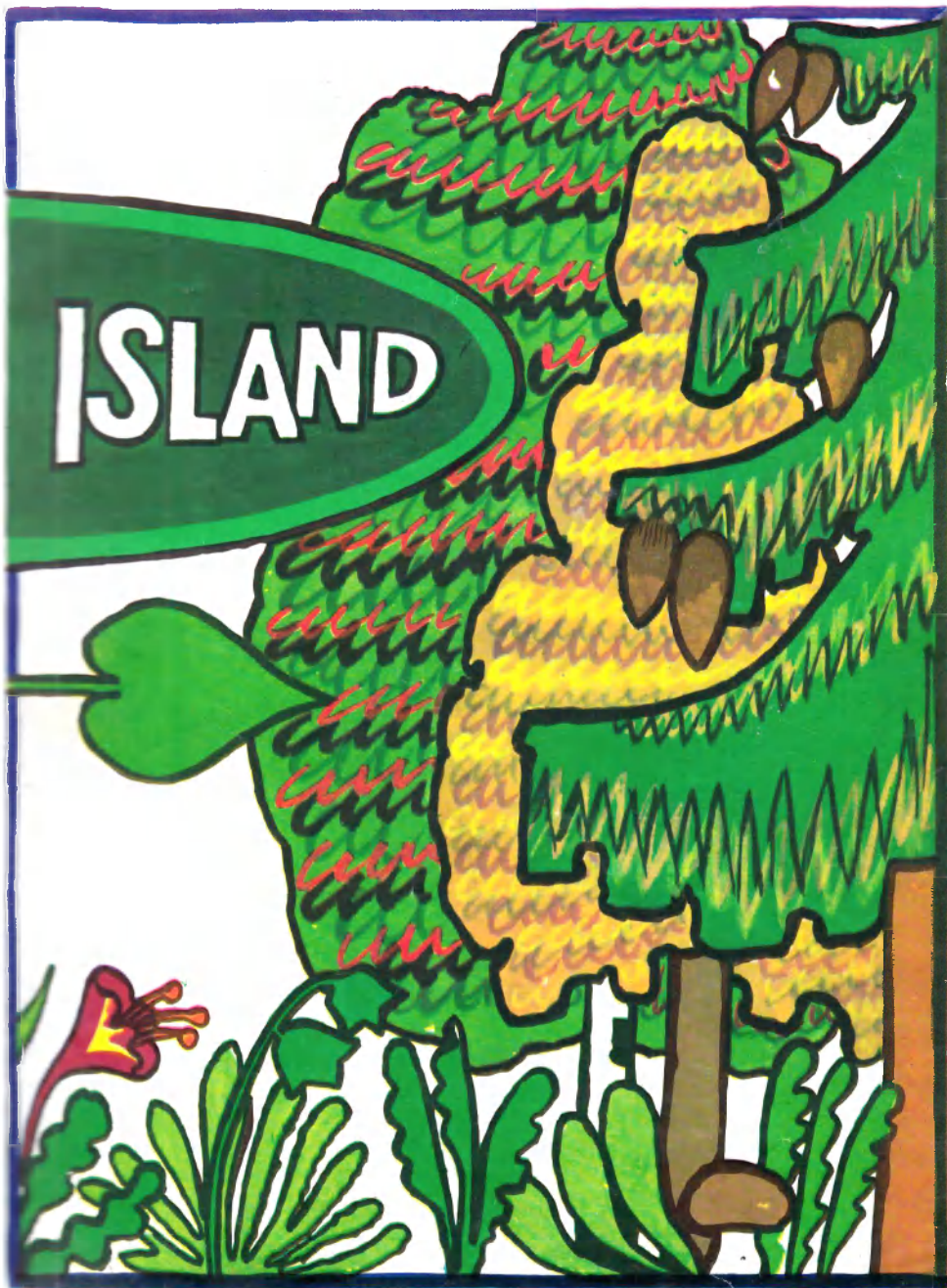


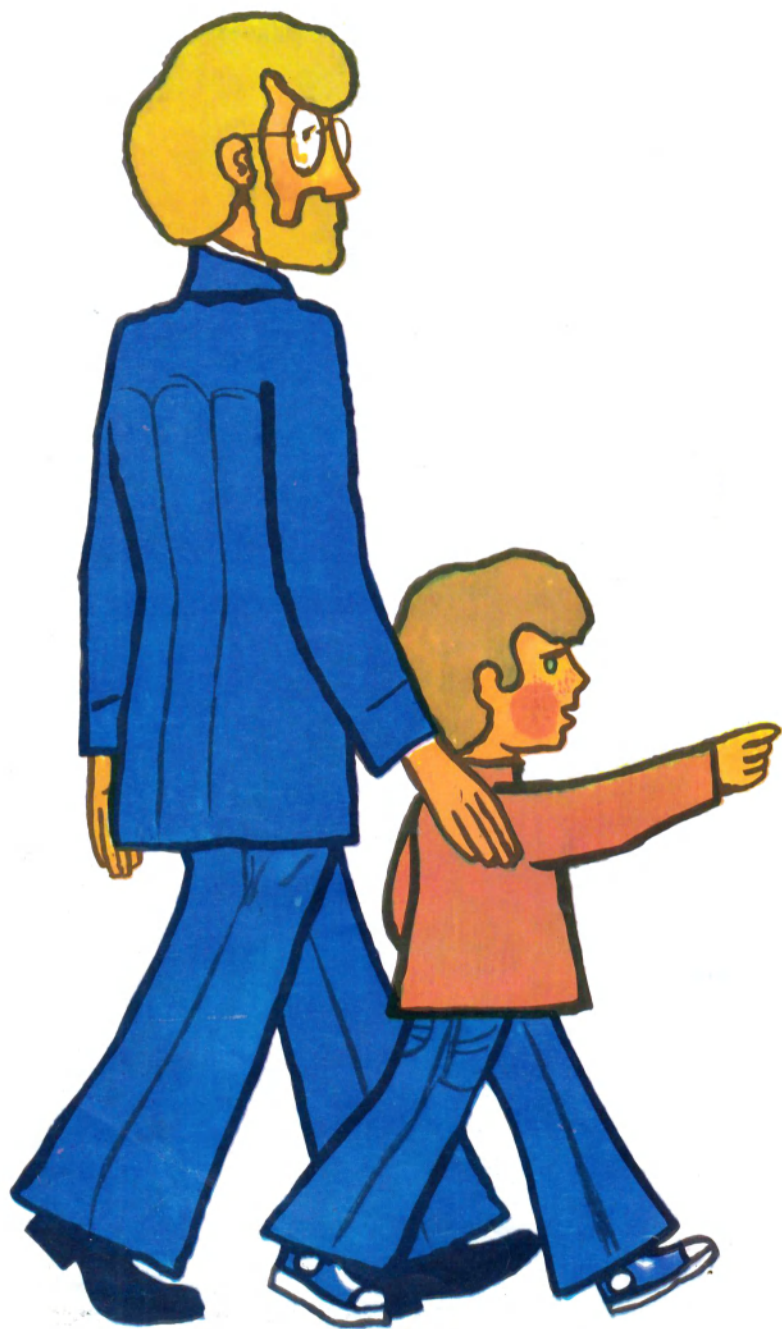
ISLAND

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Translated
from the Russian by
Jan Butler



Vadik is six years old and lives in Moscow, the capital of the Soviet Union. He is a very inquisitive and restless little boy. He loves being taken by his Daddy or Mummy on long outings around the city or into the country. He enjoys this more than anything else in the world, even more than the most delicious ice-cream. Then, as his Daddy jokes, even the buses grow tired of his questions.



3



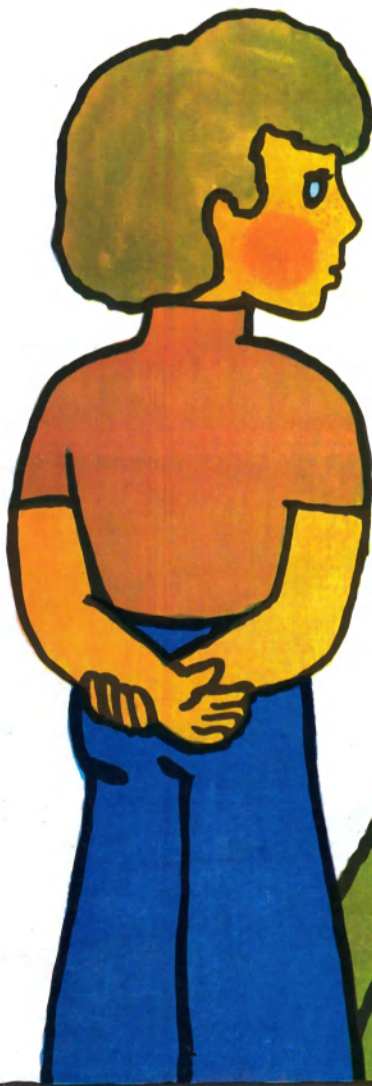


One day Vadik's Daddy came home from work and announced:

"Vadik, it's my day-off tomorrow, and you and I are going to go and explore the Botanical Gardens. They're extremely interesting! There're wonderful trees, flowers, shrubs and all sorts of different birds such as peacocks, geese, swans and ducks...."

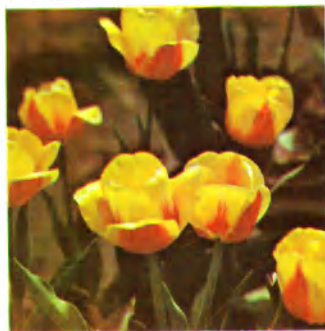
"What about squirrels?" Vadik asked with a glimmer of hope. He very much wanted to see a live squirrel.

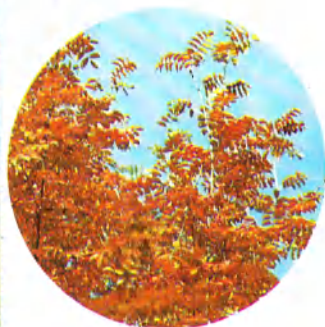
"Of course, you'll see them, too, and, what's more, they're almost tame. Take a look here...." Daddy craftily nodded at his bulging jacket-pocket. Vadik peeped in and saw that the pocket was stuffed full of large hazel nuts, squirrels' favourite titbits.



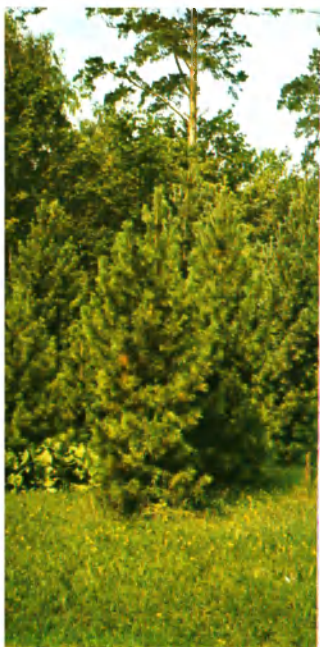


There is a wonderful nature reserve in Moscow. The Central Botanical Gardens stretch out like a vast green island between the blocks of flats enclosing them on all sides. A middle-sized town could easily be accommodated in their grounds. Plants have been gathered here from all over the world. Cypresses and palms from the torrid South grow side by side with mosses and lichens from the Far North and the Moscow firs and South American pines get on splendidly together. The lawns, flower-beds and fields of flowers are ablaze with bright colours from springtime until late autumn. Types of plants can also be found here that were created not by nature but by scientists.





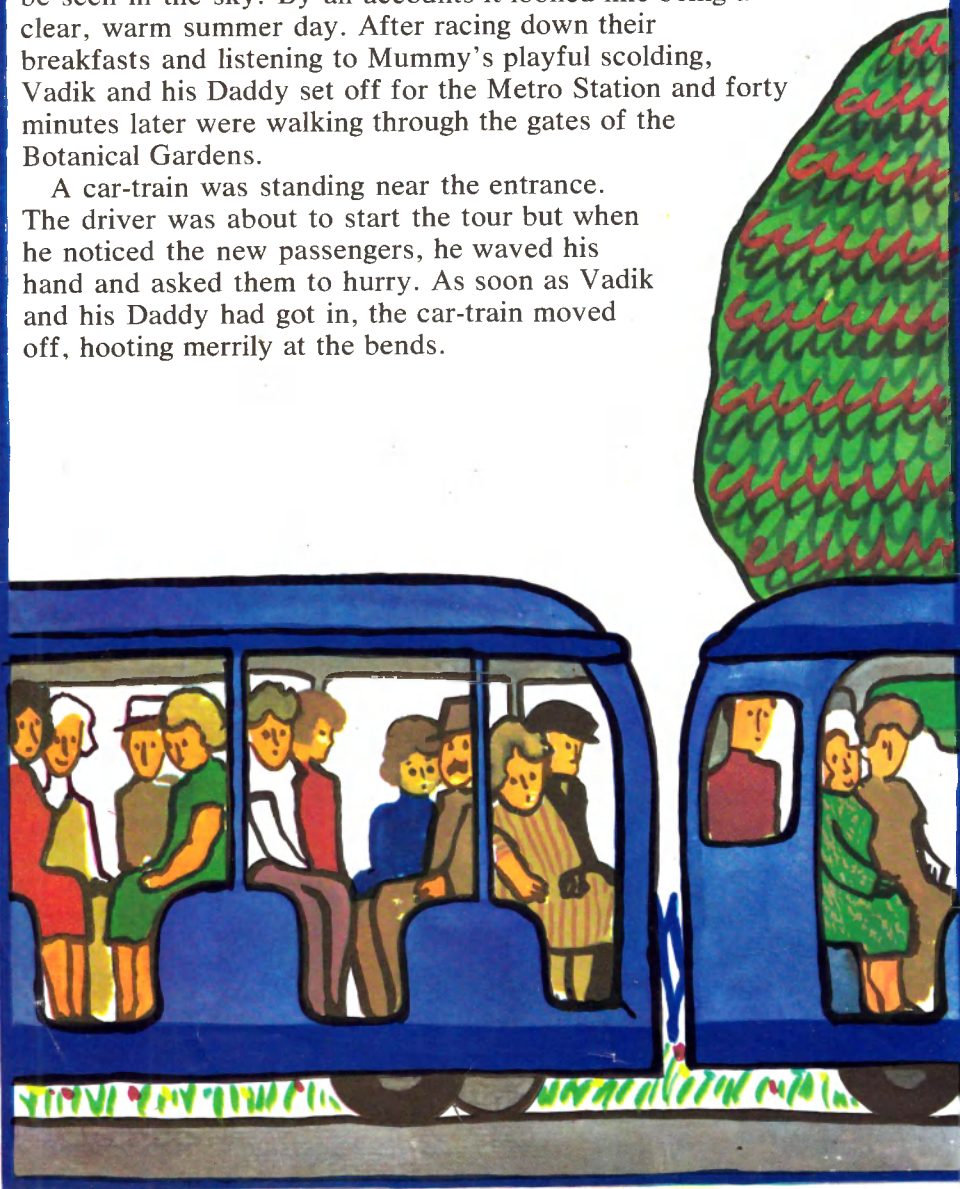
The Gardens are so large and colourful that they cannot all be seen in one day. Car-trains run along the central alleys of this wonderful nature reserve for the visitors' convenience. Once you are in the train, colourful pictures of nature pass by you like stills on a film-screen: oak and birch groves, ponds, giant flower-beds, Siberian firs, silver firs and larches, orchards, vegetable and berry gardens, surrounded by a forest which contains thousands of different species of trees from all the ends of the earth.





Daddy turned out to be lucky with his day-off. The sun shone since the early morning and there was not a cloud to be seen in the sky. By all accounts it looked like being a clear, warm summer day. After racing down their breakfasts and listening to Mummy's playful scolding, Vadik and his Daddy set off for the Metro Station and forty minutes later were walking through the gates of the Botanical Gardens.

A car-train was standing near the entrance. The driver was about to start the tour but when he noticed the new passengers, he waved his hand and asked them to hurry. As soon as Vadik and his Daddy had got in, the car-train moved off, hooting merrily at the bends.

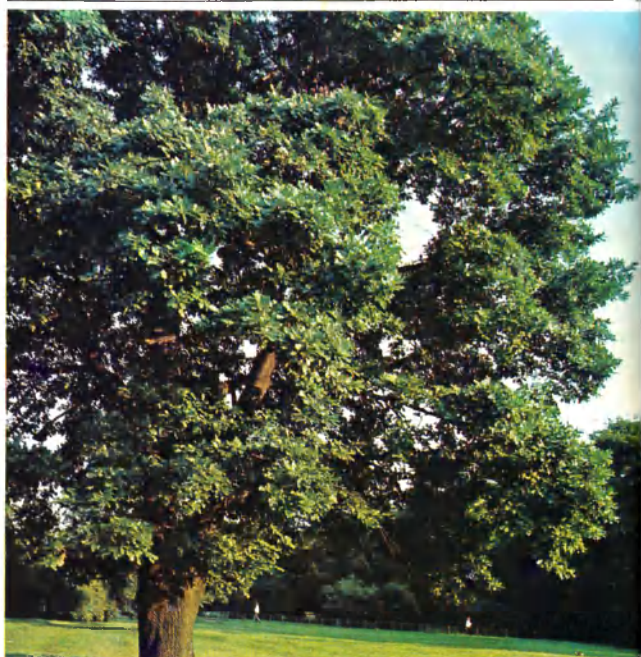




The alley was bordered by a tall, dense forest.







“Why, this is a *real* forest, Daddy!” Vadik exclaimed in amazement.

“As real as can be. It has berries and mushrooms, and lilies of the valley grow in its glades in spring. It’s also unique. You see those oaks. There’re only a few oak-groves left around Moscow and one of them is here in the Botanical Gardens. This grove is over a hundred years old and some of its gigantic oaks are two hundred years old. Look at that powerful beauty over there!”

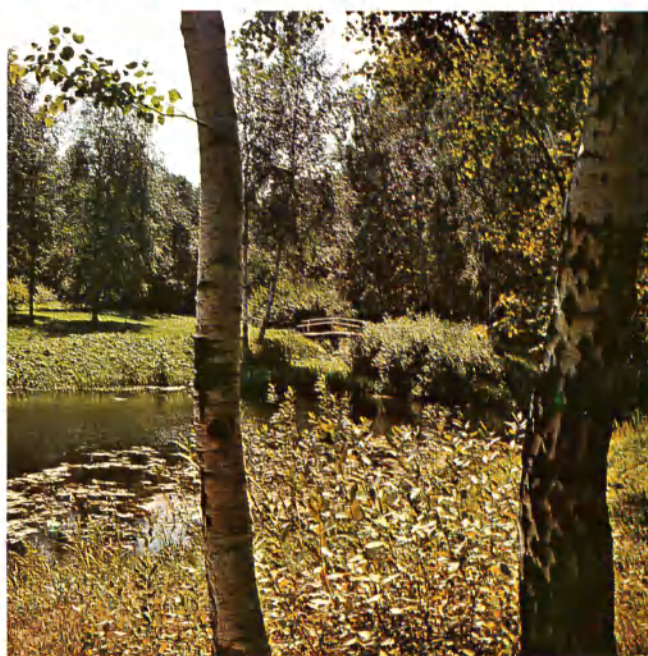
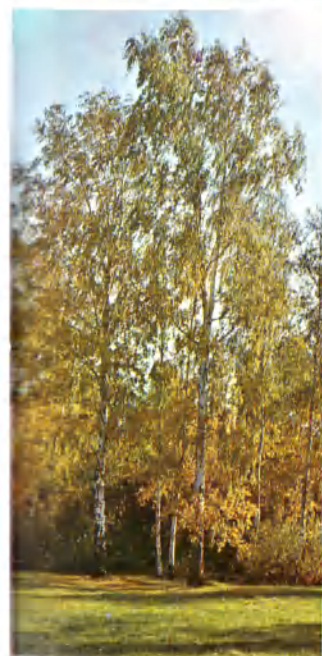
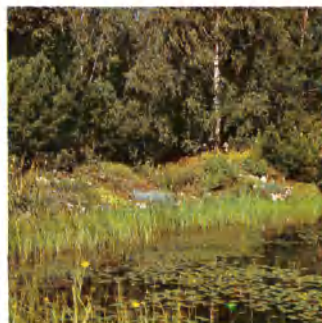


“Is the birch-grove here special, too?”

“Of course. There’re dozens of different kinds of birches in the Gardens. It only seems that all the birches are the same. If you look closely, you’ll immediately notice the difference.”

“They’re even very different,” Vadik agreed. “These birches have got light trunks and those next to them have got darker, almost brown ones.”







8

The car-train stopped. Suddenly a plaintive sharp cry came from the forest.

"Is that a squirrel calling?" Vadik asked in a whisper.

"No, dear, it's the peacocks. Let's go and have a look."

They left the train and made their way through the trees to the outdoor aviary. They were greeted by an extraordinary cry. A colony of peacocks were in the cage.

"These beautiful birds come from India," Vadik's father explained.

Vadik closely examined the beautiful peacocks and their plain grey mates.

"Why do they cry so sadly, Daddy?" Vadik inquired, and without waiting for a reply from his rather puzzled Daddy, found his own explanation. "They're probably home-sick, aren't they?"

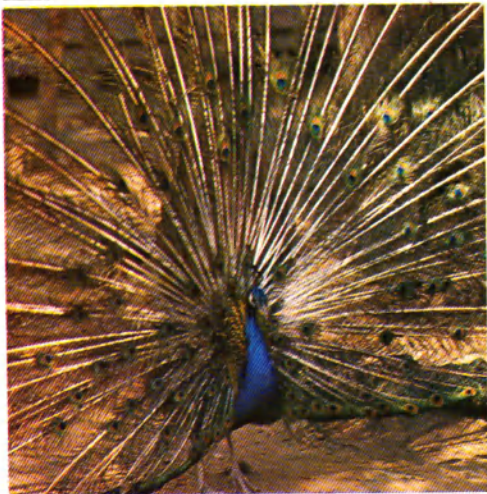
"Quite possibly. Mind you, they also cry just as sharply when they're on home soil, especially when they catch a snake. Peacocks aren't afraid of snakes and often feed on them."

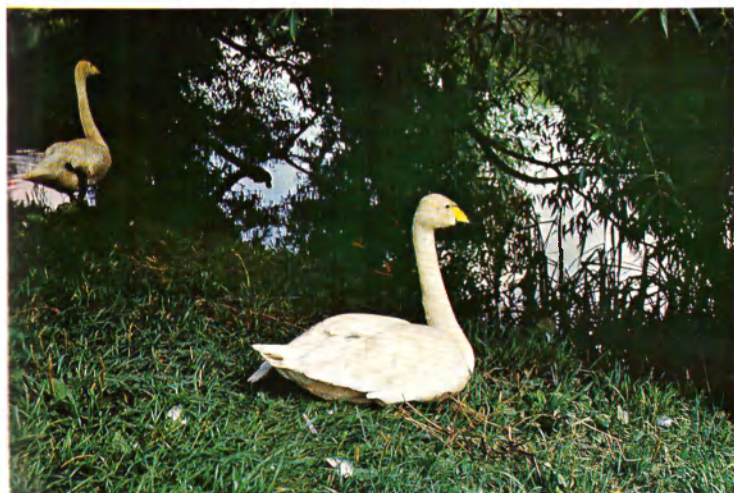


After looking at the peacocks, Vadik and his Daddy walked to the middle of the Gardens. As they turned a bend in the asphalt alley they suddenly came across a chain of ponds which were inhabited by ducks, geese and proud and beautiful swans.



20



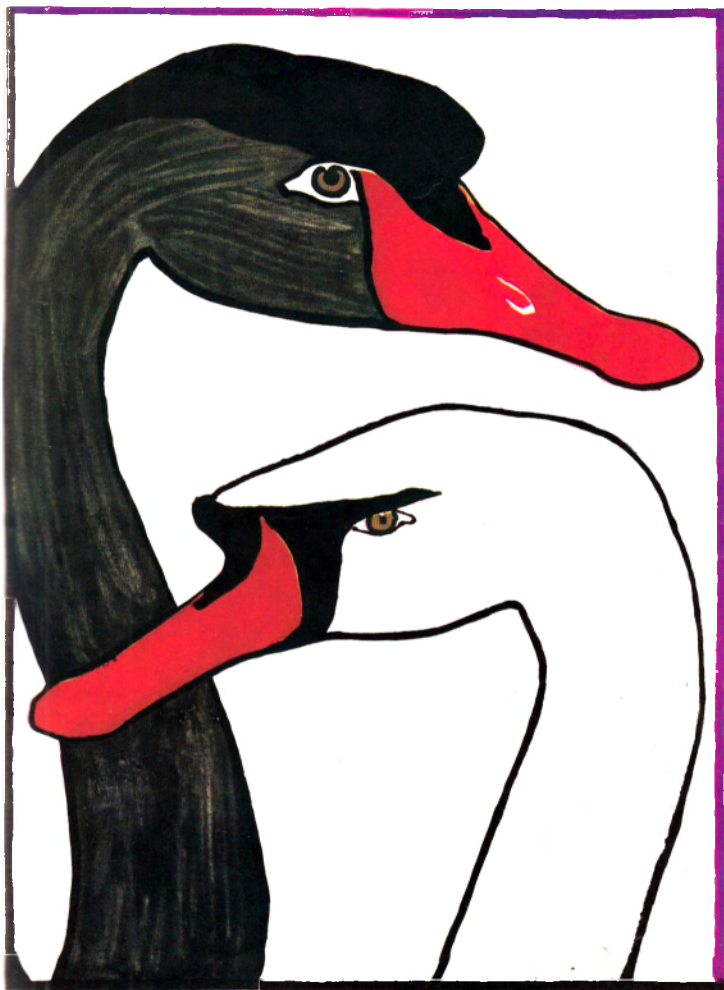


Vadik was
absolutely thrilled.
He immediately got
out the piece of
bread he had hidden
just in case and
began throwing
crumbs into the
water.

His Daddy had
great difficulty in
persuading him to
continue their walk.

They got into the
train again and went
on further.









The train passed through the grounds of the botanical tree-garden.

Firs, larches, maples, chestnuts and many other trees that had been sent to the Gardens from various countries were picturesquely arranged in clusters in the large sunlit glades. The Indian bean trees, an exotic species from North America, looked especially attractive. They were covered all over with creamy-white flowers and stood out magnificently against the bright green background.

"Are they useful trees?" Vadik inquired.

"Highly useful. Some are used as raw material for making medicines, paper and other valuable products, and others are used in decorative gardening. What's more, scientists are constantly discovering other useful properties in the plants."





Vadik gazed curiously around. He suddenly noticed a familiar-looking cart with an enticing ice-cream sign. He moved resolutely towards the door of the train. At that moment the train stopped and Vadik jumped out onto the alley, followed by his bewildered Daddy. He looked at his son, read the silent request in his eyes and immediately guessed everything.

“Are you trying to say that it’s time to get back our strength a little? Alright, an ice-cream will do just the trick right now.”

After they had bought the ice-cream Vadik and his Daddy slowly walked along the alley.







They walked through the so-called “garden in constant bloom” in which flowering shrubs and perennial grasses are intermingled with different kinds of flowers. From early spring until late autumn one plant comes into bloom after another in this corner of the Gardens, creating a bright and colourful flowering-calender effect.

But Vadik was most struck by the giant cow-parsnip which stood bolt upright and was taller than a man. Its huge leaves and round clusters of flowers were large enough to shelter both Vadik and his Daddy in a rain-storm. But it was not advisable to touch this plant as it stung like nettles.

“But where are the squirrels? Why haven’t we seen them after all this time? Have they run off somewhere from the Gardens? Will I see a squirrel, Daddy?” the little boy suddenly asked his father.

“We definitely shall see the squirrels!”



While they were busy talking and looking for the elusive squirrels, Vadik and his Daddy suddenly came to an exhibition of cultured plants. There were also many interesting things to be seen here. Vadik spotted a wild Mexican tomato plant whose fruits were no larger than peas and learnt how man, using artificial selection, gradually cultivated the tomato plant with its large juicy fruits we know today from this wild plant.

Vadik also saw for the first time a wild cabbage, the ancestor of the many varieties produced by man. He simply could not believe that the ordinary cabbage, which his Mummy liked giving him, could be so varied. It was impossible just by looking at some of the different sort of cabbages to guess what kind of plants they were. One could only tell by the label that this mysterious green ball or that exotic springy sponge were sorts of cabbages and originally came from the same family.

"Daddy, what's that strange tree? Why has it got a hoop on top of it?"

"It's an apple-tree. These are the scientists' experimental gardens. They are studying the best way for the branches to be arranged so that the fruit tree yields a maximum crop, flourishes and lives long, and so that the crop is machine-picked with the greatest of ease.... Look, this tree is shaped like a musical instrument, like a kind of lyre.

"Well, now let's go to the hothouse and have a look at some of the wonderful foreign plants," Daddy suggested.







It was warm and stuffy in the hothouse. The air had been warmed through the huge glass panes and roof and was saturated with moisture. A pleasant-looking girl was talking about some plants from the tropical countries which were terribly fragile and delicate and could only survive in hothouses in a temperate climate.

A coconut-tree almost touched the glass ceiling. Vadik stood craning his neck.

"That's a man's tree!" he announced admiringly. "Only men can climb up it and shake off the nuts. I've seen them do it on T.V.!"



Then Vadik caught the word “banana”. When he turned round he saw a huge plant and was extremely surprised to learn that it was nothing more than a giant grass, and that it produces some heavy bunches of sweet bananas once in its lifetime.

Next to the banana tree was yet another marvel: a cocoa-tree whose flowers and fruits grow on its trunk!

“Now that’s really something!” Vadik exclaimed in amazement.

But it turned out that the fig-tree, a fairly common household plant, flowered and produced fruit in exactly the same way as the cocoa-tree.

Vadik did not have time to stop and stare before the girl began speaking about some other unusual plants: the pomegranate, cactus, araucaria and box-tree. It appeared that these miniature plants were already nearly one hundred years old. They grow very slowly, but live for ages.





The next hothouse was full of orchids—exotic flowers of fantastic shapes and sizes. Over four hundred varieties were displayed on the stands. Orchids originally come from tropical forests but get on wonderfully well in Moscow, bloom all the year round and look especially magnificent in winter.

Vadik examined the flowers suspiciously. They smelled of cake and looked too beautiful to be true. He even touched a petal when none was looking and peered into the flower-pot which appeared not to contain any earth. Orchids grow on the dead roots of ferns.



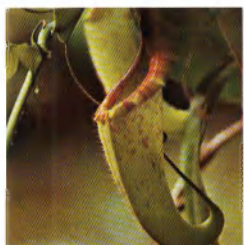


In a small hothouse with an ornamental pond in the middle of it Vadik saw a predatory plant for the first time. Dainty little horn-shaped "baskets" dangled from the plant's branches. Any insect only has to peep inside curiously and it immediately falls into a trap. The insect becomes stuck to the inner walls of the "basket" which are smeared with a sticky film. The "basket" snaps shut and the plant slowly digests its food.

The pond was also bordered with mimosa touch-me-nots, another wonderful type of plant. Its leaves immediately curl up at the slightest touch.

Vadik lingered behind by the touch-me-nots. He really enjoyed watching the small leaves become alive, as it were, when they were touched. When he caught up with the guide in the next hothouse she was talking about the famous Victoria cruziana.





The vast leaves of this "water lily", which can support up to 70 kg, stretched right across the pond. The Victoria's blossom is incredibly beautiful. Its large flower, which is sometimes up to 40 cm in diameter, gradually changes during a month from snow-white to pinkish red. In Moscow the Victoria only blossoms in very hot years.

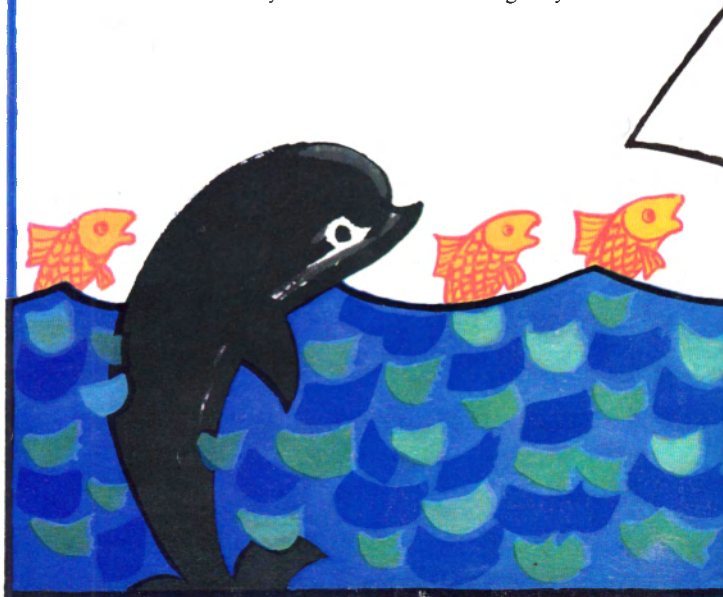
Vadik stood spell-bound and gazed at the leaves of the gigantic water lily.

"What a leaf!" The boy whispered in delight. "Why, it's just like a little raft. You could float on it, but would it hold us both, Daddy?"

His father smiled.

"I'm afraid it wouldn't, dear, but you could probably ride on it by yourself."

Vadik and his Daddy left the hothouse feeling very satisfied.



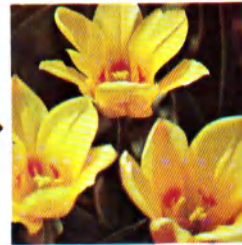


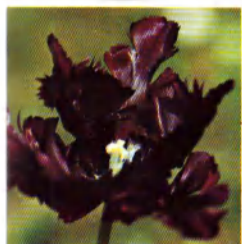


"What's that carpet over there on the grass, Daddy?"

"What carpet?"

His father did not understand and looked in the direction the boy was pointing. "That's not a carpet, it's flowers."

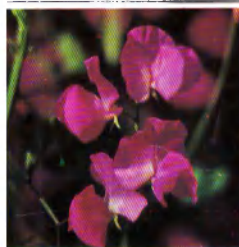






Let's have a closer look. The peonies are in bloom just now—they're very beautiful flowers. You see those short flowers over there on the lawns. You mistook them for a carpet. They are like one from a distance. In a month's







time gladioli will be flowering on these lawns—you see their green stalks. It's difficult now to imagine what rainbow of colours is produced by the different sorts of gladioli. Many floriculturalists are trying to produce new sorts of gladioli."





"These are poppies, aren't they!" Vadik said joyfully.

Bright red poppies on delicate little stalks swayed their heads in time to the gentle breeze in the glade.

"If you want to hear the poppies' song, bend down and listen," his father suggested.

Vadik obediently knelt down and leaned towards the flowers. Then he grinned cunningly and said: "The poppies sang me a song about us completely forgetting the squirrels."

Daddy burst out laughing.

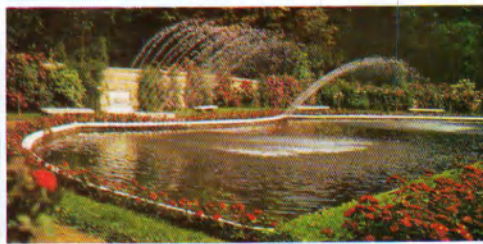
"Those flowers, it seems, are incredibly perceptive. Well, let's go and look for the squirrels. They can't be far away."





Vadik and his Daddy crossed an asphalt path, walked a few yards and were once again surrounded by flowers. This was the rose garden—the pride and joy of the Botanical Gardens. Countless varieties of roses are in bloom in the garden from spring until late autumn. One variety is called “Morning of Moscow”.







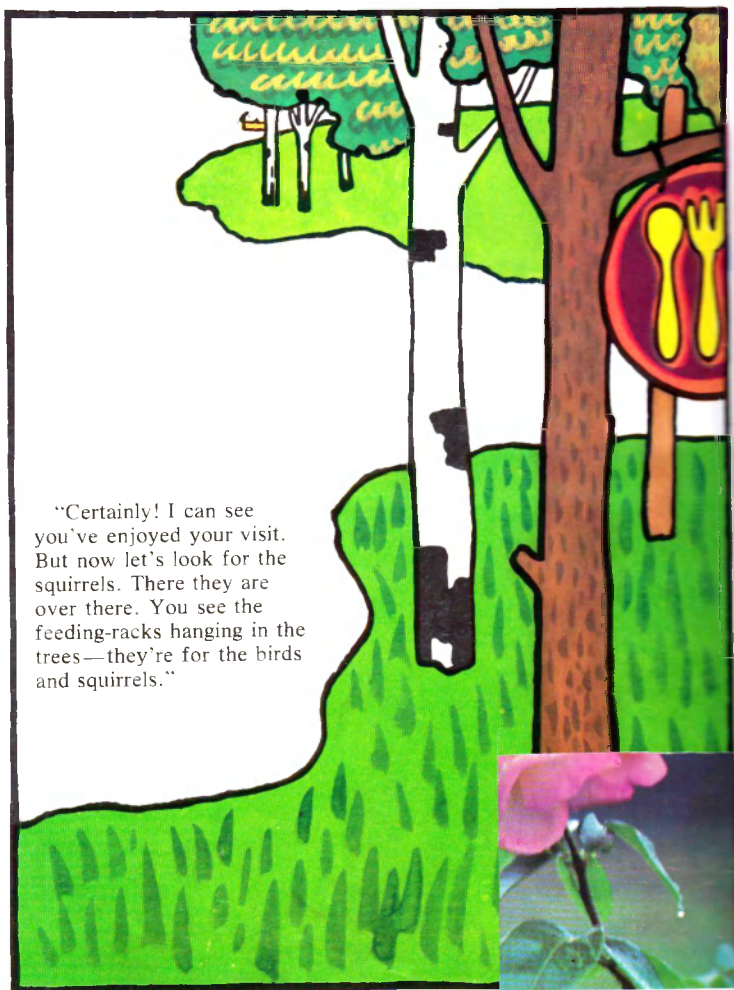
Vadik gazed at all this beauty and said knowingly:

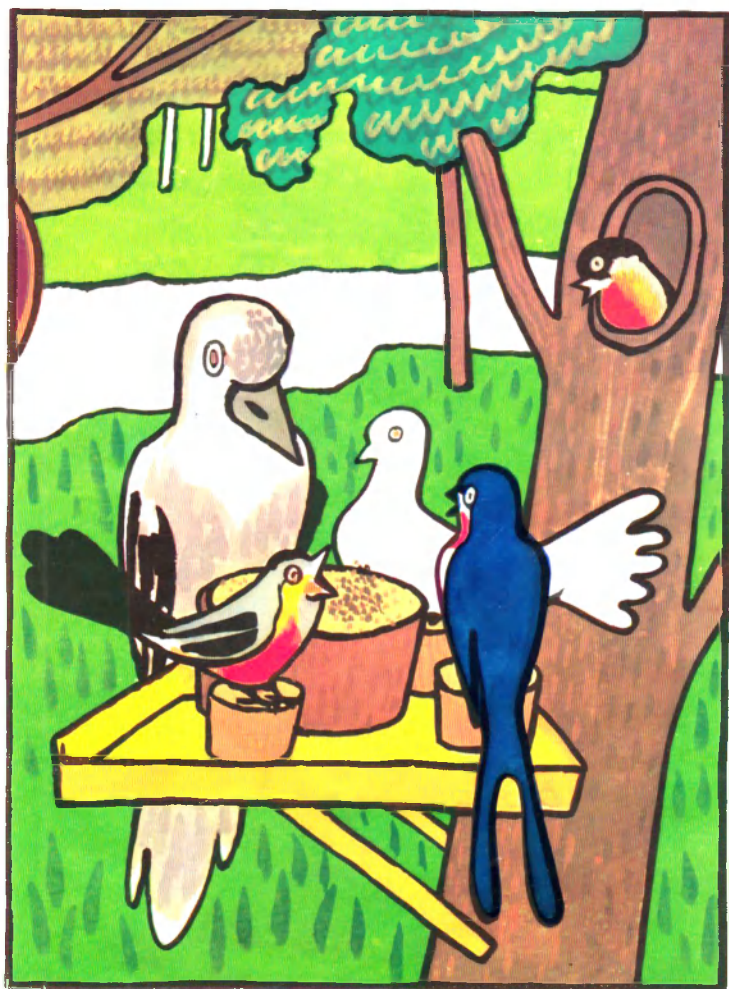
"We shall have to bring Mummy here. These are her favourite flowers. Can we all come to the Botanical Gardens on your next day-off?"





“Certainly! I can see you’ve enjoyed your visit. But now let’s look for the squirrels. There they are over there. You see the feeding-racks hanging in the trees—they’re for the birds and squirrels.”





They had only walked on a few steps when a squirrel suddenly jumped out of the trees, squatted on its hind legs and began scrutinizing the visitors.

Two others scampered up behind it.

“So you’ve got your squirrels at last. Don’t be afraid, they’re very gentle little creatures. They don’t bite and will carefully take a titbit out of your hands. Offer them some nuts.” and Daddy gave Vadik a handful.

Vadik squatted, held out his hand and opened his palm....

6









